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SENSORY ARCHAEOLOGY

This review explores the potential of sensory archaeology as a framework for interpreting the religious and ritual experiences of Bronze Age communities in Crete, with particular focus on the peak sanctuary of Kophinas and the golden rings depicting human-tree relations.

Using the work of Ruth Tringham and Annie Danis who advocate for an engagement of sensorial experiences during the archaeological research process; I will try to reconstruct how bodily perception, environmental engagement, and material production may have shaped ancient religious practices. I believe that the journey to the peak sanctuary of Kophinas can be understood as a multisensory ritual participation that, when studied in conjunction with gold rings depicting human-plant relationships reveals a profound connection between the bronze age communities of Crete and the natural world.

Ruth Tringham and Annie Danis (2019) in the book chapter: *Doing sensory archaeology*; the challenges critically examine the theoretical and methodological challenges involved in translating sensory archaeology from concept to practice. The chapter is structured around key questions that address how sensory approaches can be integrated into each stage of archaeological research, from fieldwork and excavation to interpretation and publication. In every chapter the sensorial approach is explained, and new perspectives are given to enrich archaeological thinking and methods. The authors contribute to an expanded understanding of how sensorial awareness can transform both archaeological thought and the processes of knowledge production within the discipline.

Sensory archaeology involves a profound engagement with the senses, recognizing that perception is never free from the influence of individual, cultural, and historical biases (Tringham and Danis 2019). For Annie Danis (2019), an awareness of one's own modern cultural biases is essential for the effective interpretation of archaeological data, particularly when engaging with sensory dimensions of the past. Drawing on the foundational sensory studies of David Howes and Constance Classen, Tringham and Danis (2019) propose three principal approaches to sensory archaeology.

The first approach recognizes the senses in interpreting the archaeological record but is limited by the Aristotelian five-sense model and overlook social and cultural dimensions. The second group recognizes that human experiences are shaped by history and culture, resulting in multiple layers and diverse forms of sensory experience. The third treats the senses as analytical tools, using embodied and multisensory engagement to rethink interpretation and challenge Western epistemologies (Tringham and Danis, 2019).

In my Opinion one of the most compelling aspects of Tringham and Danis's (2019) discussion is their proposition that sensory archaeology requires a narrative mode of thought, as opposed to a purely scientific logical mode. This approach constructs specific connections between two events using imagination to bridge interpretive gaps. These moments of speculation became an integral component of the process, thus they are not concealed but made transparent within the narrative itself, allowing reflection and dialogue to emerge as part of the interpretive act. The main goal of sensorial archaeology is to "evoke action and understanding (communication, dialogue, discussion) about possible pasts". (Tringham and Danis, 2019).

Building on their approach, I propose to explore how Bronze Age communities of Crete may have cultivated a distinctive sensory and symbolic relationship with plants and trees. My analysis will focus on gold rings depicting arboreal imagery and human figures, as well as the peak sanctuary of Kophinas, where remains of burnt plant materials have been recovered (Henckel, Margaritis, 2002). Following Jo Day's (2012) suggestion that the trees depicted on golden rings should be understood as central subjects rather than mere background motifs, I aim to decentre the anthropocentric bias that often characterizes Western archaeological interpretation. By placing plants at the centre of analysis, this study seeks to reconstruct a more than human sensorial world in which vegetation played an active role in shaping ritual, perception, and meaning.

In this research, I will be guided by Ruth Tringham and Annie Danis's (2019) suggestions regarding the reconstruction of sensorial archaeological realities. I consider the principles of sensory archaeology particularly valuable for the study of ancient religion, since religious practices are inherently sensorial experiences. During ritual activities, individuals engage with their surroundings through sound, smell, movement, and touch, experiencing both personal and communal forms of participation. These embodied interactions form the sensory fabric of ritual life. As Colin Renfrew (2007) notes, religion frequently involves ritual practices, though not all rituals are necessarily religious in nature. Similarly, Evangelos Kyriakidis (2007) argues that "if ritual is isolated from its context, it cannot be studied fully."

By bringing together Renfrew's (2007) and Kyriakidis's (2007) insights on ritual with Tringham and Danis's (2019) narrative mode of thought, it becomes possible to formulate a new interpretive framework for understanding the material traces of ritual activity in archaeological contexts. This integrated, bottom-up and interdisciplinary approach invites researchers to reconstruct not only what people did, but how they felt, sensed, and experienced their ritual environments. It opens questions such as: Why did people feel compelled to gather? Which senses were engaged during large communal events? What might the sensory journey to a sanctuary or sacred site have been like? Did participants travel alone or in groups? What textures, colors, and smells surrounded them along the way? Was their clothing uniform or varied, ceremonial or practical?

In analysing the peak sanctuary of Kophinas, I align with Insoll's (2009) assertion that "the sensory experiences of past people would have been filtered through countless past multisensory memories produced through collective interactions." While it is impossible to reconstruct precisely how Bronze Age Cretan communities experienced this peak sanctuary, acknowledging this limitation is crucial. As Tringham and Danis (2019) argue, awareness of one's own cultural and historical biases is a necessary step toward transcending them, opening pathways for new and more inclusive interpretations of past experiences. One productive way to achieve this is by engaging with ethnographic studies of Indigenous and non-Western communities, whose embodied and multisensory relationships with landscape may offer valuable comparative insights.

This perspective resonates with the observations of R. Haaland and G. Haaland (2011), who emphasize that landscape perception is inherently subjective, varying according to individual experience and social context. The activities associated with the peak sanctuary of Kophinas necessarily involved movement through the landscape, as participants walked up the mountain to reach the sacred site. Here, the work of Lee Vergunst (2008) on walking, provides a compelling framework for exploring the embodied dimensions of such movement. Vergunst highlights the physical awareness of one's surroundings and the sensory engagement with the

terrain that walking entails. Applying this perspective to the Kophinas sanctuary allows for an exploration of how Bronze Age individuals might have experienced their environment through bodily motion, rhythm, and interaction with others along the route.

Incorporating these insights within the framework proposed by Tringham and Danis (2019), my study seeks to reconstruct not a definitive sensory reality of the past, but a reflexive and imaginative evocation of how the body, the environment, and social relations may have converged in the sensorial experience at Kophinas.

As Bronze Age communities journeyed toward the peak sanctuaries, they would have traversed a variety of landscapes and ecological zones, each offering distinct sensory experiences. To explore these experiences, I will draw on Paul Rodaway's (1994) concept of "sensuous geography". Guided by Tringham and Danis's (2019) methodological reflections on reconstructing sensorial archaeological realities, I aim to imagine how the interaction between people and their natural surroundings might have unfolded during these journeys. This approach allows for the consideration of not only the visual dimension of the landscape but also its sounds, textures, and smells: the rustling of leaves, the unevenness of the ground, or the scent of vegetation encountered along the way, all contributing to an embodied engagement with the environment.

Golden rings depicting human figures in relation to trees and plants, for example fig. 1, offer another avenue for understanding the sensorial world of Bronze Age Crete.



Fig 1 Minoan gold ring of Mochlos, Richard Berry Seager (1912)

Following Tim Ingold's (2011) discussion in "Walking the plank: meditations on a process of skill", these artifacts can be understood not merely as representations but as the outcome of embodied craftsmanship. The creation of such intricate objects required significant time, technical expertise, and sensory awareness. Each ring thus materializes both a physical and

cognitive engagement with the materials and motifs it portrays. From this perspective, the depictions of human–plant interaction may reflect deeply rooted cultural meanings, suggesting that trees and vegetation held a central position in the bronze age communities of Crete.

In conclusion, by integrating the sensorial and narrative approaches of Tringham and Danis (2019) with the theoretical insights of Renfrew (2007), Kyriakidis (2007), Insoll (2011), Rodaway (1994), Vergunst (2008), and Ingold (2011) enables a more embodied understanding of Bronze Age religious practice in Crete. Sensory archaeology reveals ritual, movement, and craftsmanship as interwoven processes through which meaning was created and experienced.

Plants held a special position for the bronze age communities of Kophinas, thus the pilgrimage to the peak sanctuary can be imagined as a multisensory experience shaping both individual perception and collective identity, as well as the gold rings' depictions of human–plant interaction suggest profound relationships between people and the natural world. A reflexive, bottom-up interpretive approach does not aim to reconstruct exact sensory realities but to evoke plausible connections between people, environments, and material culture. In doing so, sensory archaeology fosters dialogue between ancient and contemporary ways of knowing, encouraging us to reconsider how the past is understood through perception and imagination.

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Figures

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